

## **CIBOLA COUNTY BEACON**

### **Students partner with CASA program to help children**

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GRANTS - Jennifer Valencia, Gabrielle Lee and Melford Garcia, all students at New Mexico State University-Grants, believe that they can make a positive effect in the Grants community. As students in a political science class working closely with CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates), they are learning how they can work within the legal system to help people at the local level, while simultaneously deepening their understanding of how local government and judicial systems operate. Through their participation in the university's Service Learning Program, they have also helped form a mutually beneficial partnership between CASA and NMSU-Grants.

The partnership was formed, in part, to help CASA meet the needs of abused and neglected children in Cibola County. The CASA program trains volunteers to advocate in court for the best interests of abused and neglected children. CASA volunteers, appointed directly by the judge, are involved in one-on-one personal relationships with children in foster care, their families, teachers, therapists, social workers and attorneys. The volunteers make a report to the judge to advocate progress and service for the children.

The partnership was also formed to meet the needs of students at NMSU-Grants. The university has established a Service Learning Program, with the belief that students can achieve understanding of class material through hands-on service within the community. In addition to traditional forms of classroom instruction, students work closely with non-profit or governmental agencies in ways that relate directly to their class work at school, allowing them to deepen their understanding of classroom material, while also providing needed services to the community.

Dr. Bill Serban, a Political Science instructor at NMSU-Grants, offered his students the opportunity to work with CASA this semester as a part of his class, through the learning program. The three students decided to participate.

Many abused and neglected children from all over Cibola County, with many different backgrounds, can benefit from the services that CASA offers. On average, 30 percent of the children served are Hispanic, 30 percent are Native Persons, and 30 percent are Anglo. Unfortunately, there are so many children who need CASA's services the non-profit agency is struggling to recruit enough volunteers to meet that need. Fred Stumpf, Volunteer Coordinator of Cibola County CASA, is concerned that so far this year 61 children have needed the support of CASA volunteers, yet due to the volunteer shortage only 14 have been paired with a trained CASA volunteer.

Valencia, Lee and Garcia are working with Stumpf to educate the community about the problems of abused and neglected children and familiarize them with what CASA is and what it is doing to support these children.

As Valencia explained, "I want people of the community to be informed and know what CASA is and what the program provides. If we are able to inform the community [about] CASA then hopefully the program can get more recognition and the community can get more involved." Through their efforts, they hope to increase the number of trained volunteers so that they can advocate for more abused and neglected children in the community. They also hope to better understand how the local judicial system works with agencies like CASA to meet the needs of its citizens.

"The CASA program has helped me in my political science class," Garcia stated, "by allowing me to understand what level of government is involved with the basic needs of a child and the basic process of a child through the legal system."

Both Valencia and Garcia plan to continue their work with CASA after their project is finished. They said they see their experience as helping them toward their life goals. Valencia, who is from the village of Encinal in Laguna, explained that, "joining this project has influenced me very much to continue on what I want to [get] out of my education. I hope to become a social worker because I want to help families and make a difference in their lives".

Garcia, who is from Acoma Pueblo, and a veteran back from Iraq, is majoring in International Business and plans to go into law. "My hopes for the CASA program under the NMSU Service Learning project are to give me a better understanding of how our local government and judicial systems operate, how to be a more productive citizen by participation, and how the basic needs of children affect them in the long run."

These students are learning, through serving, that they can make a positive effect in their community.

For more information about the CASA program, and how you and your organization can get involved, call Fred Stumpf, the Volunteer Coordinator of Cibola County CASA, at 287-0664, or e-mail him at [cibolactycasa@aol.com](mailto:cibolactycasa@aol.com).

For more information about the Service Learning Program at NMSU-Grants, call Genevieve Humenay, Service Learning Coordinator, at 287-6634, or e-mail her at [ghumenay@nmsu.edu](mailto:ghumenay@nmsu.edu).

By Genevieve Humenay

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